

**Interview by Steve Frech of Peter Johnson. *Another Chicago Magazine*. Reprinted on
Poetry Daily.**

Stephen Frech: Jokes and humor have long held a place in psychoanalytic thought, but I read an article by Louis Franzini titled “Humor in Therapy” promoting “formal humor training for therapists.” It seems to me that a quality about humor (just like psychology itself) eludes analysis and formal training. Nevertheless, given the humor in your poems, what coping, cathartic, or revelatory qualities do you think humor adds to poems in general or to your poems more specifically? Is humor something that helps you write, then becomes part of the very fabric of the poem?

Peter Johnson: It’s a curious idea: therapists learning how to be funny so they can teach others to be funny. If the purpose of this training is to make people laugh at themselves, I’m all for it. Jonathan Swift compares satire to a mirror in which everyone sees everyone’s face but their own, which is why they laugh so hard. But in the perfect satire—if we think of satire as actually being able to affect change—we should see our own reflections; and the best satirists are those who realize they possess the traits they satirize. Satire doesn’t work when we sense the presence of a smug author looking down at his sniveling creations. No complexity there at all.

But you’re right to stress comedy in my work. I wrote a dissertation on black humor, and my first prose poems were influenced by the ancient Greek writer Theophrastus, who wrote a book of comic character sketches called *Characters*. But if humor has become part of the very “fabric” of my poetry, as you say, that’s occurred simply because I view the world comically. I’m a wise guy. I didn’t have to invent that persona, so the mixture of the high and low in my work, which creates the humor is really not deliberate.

S.F.: So where do you think that comic edge originated for you?

P.J.: I grew up in a working-class environment. My father was a mailman and a steel worker, but because I was smart and a good athlete, I received a classical education at a Jesuit high school. I spent my formative years straddling high and low cultures, so, in *Miracles & Mortifications*, it comes naturally for me to present Socrates with a booger in his nose or to have Kepler chirping, “Be good to my bird” as he tries “to shake the celestial cacophony from his head.” The narrators of the two sections of *Miracles* are funny to watch precisely because they try to embrace grand narratives of high culture while everything is collapsing around them.

In the first section, “Travels with Gigi,” the narrator keeps waiting for his girlfriend to behave according to some courtly love tradition, but not she’s interested in that tradition; she’s unpredictable, a real ballbuster. And in the second section, “Travels with Oedipus,” the father needs to believe in a dignified Western historical tradition, while his teenage son just wants to have a good time. My “high,” idealistic sensibility sympathizes with the father; my “low,” wise-guy sensibility with Gigi and the son. It’s the tension between these two that creates most of the humor. It’s important to remember that every satirist is really an idealist. You don’t obsessively attack or make fun of something unless you’re very hurt because that “something” is not living up to your expectations. If ten satiric poets had a sleepover, they’d begin the evening lampooning everything in sight, including each other, but by daybreak they’d all be hugging each other and weeping.

Because of my comic sensibility, it makes sense to me that I rejected all the trappings of verse poetry and turned to the prose poem. Originally, I wanted my poetry to echo the metrical schemes and elevated subjects of those Latin and Greek writers I had translated in high school and college, but the results were always strained, inauthentic. I had the same results with free verse. Though I can’t prove it, I think the prose poem wants to be funny. It steals the techniques

of verse and discourses of prose, then shows up at the party and flaunts them in the most unlikely ways.

S.F.: And the high and low collide from the beginning in your first book. The first time I read the title, *Pretty Happy!*, I laughed out loud: to proclaim one's happiness, but qualify it as only moderate seems a funny mitigating exclamation. The title poem and others in the book, "A Ritual as Old as Time Itself" and "The Games" come to mind, hold just that edge: comic strategies articulating serious or difficult experience.

P.J.: I'm glad you saw the irony in the title. Irony, of course, is one way into humor. I've always been interested in those ancient comic characters like the *eirōn* (the self-deprecator), the *alazon* (the impostor) and the buffoon, and those characters are scattered throughout *Pretty Happy!* Very often the humor in those poems occurs when we look at characters differently than they do. Many of my first-person narrators are glass half-empty people, even the narrators who resemble me. According to the New Aegers, the answer to the question of whether the glass is half-filled or half-empty is that there is water in the glass. That's a nice philosophy to live by, but it makes for lousy literature. I'm after a dark irony related to the absurd. I try to avoid that fashionable cynicism or superficial cleverness we see everywhere in our culture. If you listen carefully, you'll notice that more and more people are beginning to talk like sit-com characters. I prefer the dark ironic and comic moments of Kafka and Nicanor Parra.

S.F.: I think too of Shakespeare's Bottom for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, another model for the dark, comic irony you describe and perhaps an edged, self-deprecating character for Shakespeare and all writers—Bottom the playwright with the ass's head: "I shall call it Bottom's Dream because it hath no bottom."

P.J.: Bottom is a good character to allude to, half man and half beast and his ludicrous courtship

of Titania embodies the high-low nature of so much comedy—Bottom representing the flesh, Titania the spirit. Again, the clashing and merging of opposites creates comedy. But I like Puck’s line best: “Lord, what fools these mortals be!” True, but you still have the love them.

S.F.: Stephen Dobyns says he writes with a statue on his desk of a dwarf dressed as a jester, bent over in an ugly mocking laugh. He wants to remind himself that he’s practicing a deception against the reader and himself. You similarly seem concerned about deceptions of self-importance in much contemporary writing.

P.J.: There are probably about five books I wish I had written, and Dobyns’ *Cemetery Nights* is one of them. I like the idea of his dwarf; it celebrates the comic stance while also steering the writer away from that arrogant, superior position I mentioned earlier. I remember showing Robert Bly one of my poems when I was interviewing him. At first, he expressed a certain dismay at the anger in it, but then, as if to cheer me up, he pointed out that, besides philosophers, the tribe also needed warriors and tricksters. That was a predictable Bly-as-Shaman response, but I understood what he meant. Early in my career, I pictured myself writing and reciting deeply metaphysical poems while being surrounded by fifteen naked Joni Mitchell look-a-likes playing recorders fashioned from ivory tusks. But now I embrace anger and even enjoy playing the fool, realizing it suits my temperament. But it’s a precarious persona, because it’s so easy to become topical or trivial. Just last week I heard a well-known poet say that the Age of Irony is over. She was attacking, I think, the many imitators of Ashbery and Billy Collins, yet the Age of Irony can never be over because it’s built into the human condition, and recognizing it often takes us to a higher level. Consider what contemporary poetry would be like if ironists like Simic, Tate, and Edson hadn’t come upon the scene.

S.F.: In what way is the prose poem, with its inherent confounding genre tension, the exact

vessel for the absurd or dark ironic moments you describe.

P.J.: As I said, I think it has a predisposition toward comedy. I also wonder if so many prose poets are comic poets because they became interested in the form while reading the French symbolists and surrealists. We can see the beginnings of comic and absurd juxtapositions and puns associated with surrealism, Dada, and cubism in the works of Baudelaire and Rimbaud. Perhaps, then, part of the comedy we're discussing is organic in the prose poem itself, and part is learned. Of course, I have no proof for any of this.

S.F.: I'm very interested in your inclusion of the surrealists and wonder if we could linger there for a moment. Surrealists of all disciplines used conscious strategies (games, optical illusions, juxtapositions) as vehicles for accessing altered or other states of consciousness. Again, perhaps in prose poetry's play of cross genre, we see the irony of conscious access to the unconscious. What can you say about the prose poem as a discourse or even a struggle between the conscious and the unconscious?

P.J.: I think the freedom that prose allows encourages the kind of leaping Bly speaks of in his essay "Looking for Dragon Smoke"—a leaping from the conscious mind to the unconscious and back again. But it's impossible to describe this process; it's intuitive. If we could pinpoint the leaps between the conscious and unconscious in a poem, then it would be a lousy poem. But, still, both parts of the mind must be at work. When I write a poem I bring experiences, emotions—whatever—to it. I trust my imagination to create a poem from this raw material, and in the first draft, I often feel like someone working on a jigsaw puzzle, blindfolded. I guess you could argue that I tap the unconscious here; I guess you could say, as Bly does, that in the prose poem "the conscious mind, at least to a degree, gives up the adversary position it usually adopts toward the unconscious, and a certain harmony between the two takes place."

But I'm skeptical of saying too much about it. I'm really more interested in another part of the process—the constant rewriting and reinventing every time I go back to the poem. Houdini thought genius was repetition. At times, even he was surprised by some of his escapes, but he believed he reached this mystical state (though he wouldn't have called it that) by repeating his routines over and over again, not by invoking the gods. He was referring, I think, to a kind of obsessiveness that is very creative, a kind of controlled pursuit of the G-spot of the poem. If one suffers this process over and over again, it's easier to get there the next time. But, again, you can analyze things too much. When the first volume of my journal came out, someone said that the black and white cover captured the poetry-prose and conscious-unconscious oppositions in the prose poem. In fact, the cover was black and white because I started with a \$2000 budget and couldn't afford a four-color cover.

S.F.: Art commentary frequently makes such silly gaffs. Confronted with a sexual reading of his “Upright Motive #5,” Henry Moore says simply that he called the sculpture “The Hole and the Lump,” because there was a lump on top and a hole below. Pressed further about sexual shape and “motive,” Moore responded: When you slice a walnut, that's the form you find. Still, our strategies of process, labor and repetition among them, work for what Russell Edson describes as the ideal prose poem: “a small, complete work, utterly logical within its own madness.” He's come to understand his process as “dreaming awake.” If we overlook the easy misunderstandings/manipulations of his ideas, what can we say about the prose poem's long interest in the unconscious as creative vehicle?

P.J.: I guess you could argue that if you privilege the unconscious, it makes sense you'll be attracted to prose. Remember that the word verse comes from the Latin *verto*, to turn, so if you're a verse poet, even if you rely on the unconscious, as of course you must, your line breaks

or metrical choices, the various twists or turns you adopt, will eventually come into play. I like to think that Rimbaud didn't consciously choose the prose poem, but that, in his attempt to make himself a vehicle for the unconscious, prose naturally presented itself. Ironically, he had to go deep into his own unconscious to escape from himself. "For I is an other," he said. "If brass wakes a trumpet, it is not its fault." I'm sure the Surrealists were aware of this possibility of prose, even if they looked at it more subjectively than Rimbaud did. Perhaps the freedom poets feel with the prose poem comes from this opportunity to wander and listen to the unconscious, instead of having to write with all the great versifiers of Western Civilization looking over their shoulders.

S.J.: The prose poem has earned considerable recognition of late: magazine allocation and prizes, among them your *Miracles & Mortifications*, which received the 2001 James Laughlin Award. Do you think, as some have said, that *The Prose Poem: An International Journal* single-handedly began a new prose-poem renaissance?

P.J.: If that were true, then I would be a visionary. How nice! But, in fact, there was prose-poem activity in journals way before I came along. Steve Wilson was publishing a journal a few years before mine; Greg Boyd was always receptive to prose poems in his *Asylum Annual*; and in 1985 Karen Donovan and Walker Rumble began *Paragraph Magazine*, which has published and is still publishing "paragraphs," which, to me, look a hell of a lot like prose poems. Over the last twenty years other journals have done special issues on the prose poem. And although the Oberlin Press and New Rivers Press anthologies were published in 1995, I'm sure those editors were thinking of editing them before that.

But I think my journal did give people permission to write prose poems. I noticed that many poets who were writing both verse and prose poetry turned exclusively to the prose poem

when they saw it was being taken more seriously. Also, I was fortunate that Bly, Edson, Simic, Naomi Shihab Nye, David Ignatow, and Sybil James came on immediately as contributing editors, and then Morton Marcus joined up later. These people gave legitimacy to the journal and made it easier to distribute. Now it's common to see prose poems in magazines and books, though I think poets have misunderstood the so-called freedom of prose poetry. Edson once said to me that the problem with most poems is that there is too much language chasing too little of an idea. Every poet, especially every prose poet, should have that taped over his desk. I do.

S.F.: Your journal was not well received in all quarters: what did you think of David Foster Wallace's diatribe on *The Best of the Prose Poem*?

P.J.: One can only wonder why a big shot like Wallace would have even bother with my little journal. I'm sure there's an idiotic story there somewhere. Certainly it was an odd review, often funny, but mostly creepy because it was so personal and because his painfully self-conscious prose style makes one wince. He even made fun of my name, pointing out its penile connotations. The last person to do that was nine years old. My only guess is that in one of my previous lives I ran over him with my chariot or dumped a chamber pot on his head. It would have helped, though, if he had actually known something about the prose poem because he's a brilliant guy, and he could have made some sense of the genre. Instead, he went for the cheap laughs and he cavalierly dissed a lot of very fine poems and poets. I think he just wanted to create a new genre (what he called an "indexical book review") and blast someone. He wanted to show off. Ironically the \$2000 budget I had for the journal is probably less than the yearly interest he earns from his Macarthur. It's a curious literary climate where our *enfant terribles* live off fellowships and have multi-million dollar endowed chairs. Whatever happened to the real bad boys?

S.F.: Speaking of bad boys, do you think that the prose poem is an unlikely horse for the bad children of poetry to ride? You have said that poets have misunderstood the “so-called freedom of prose-poetry.” The truly bad children will ignore us, but what do you think they should understand?

P.J: While editing my journal, I was irked by the lack of discipline in the prose of the same poets who would bring much higher standards to their verse poetry. Also, mistakenly, many poets think the prose poem gives them permission to write more and faster with little revision, adding even more flotsam and jetsam to an increasingly manic literary scene. I can’t tell you how many times I heard, “If you don’t like these poems, I’ve got a hundred more.” Indeed, they did. Unfortunately, the prose poem offers what appears to be an easy form for poets who don’t want to work hard. They think, “Wow, I can just sit back, look out the window, and be clever. And I don’t even have to worry about line breaks.”

Another thing that annoyed me was how little poets knew about prose poetry. Believe it or not, the prose poem is an actual genre with a real literary history. It didn’t start with Bly and Edson, and you’d be surprised what you can learn from poets who wrote something before 1960. It’s clear that nowadays you can graduate from an MFA program without having to read very much. So I wonder what will happen to the prose poem in the next few years. I fear that I may be forced to resurrect my journal, muck up my life for another nine years, then come out with another “Best of *The Prose Poem*,” which David Foster Wallace will review in his attempt to create yet another obscure literary genre while simultaneously pointing out that I’m a moron.

S.F.: Going back to the idea of “Best of” books and to anthologies of prose poems, what do you think of the two new anthologies that were published this year: David Lehman’s *Great American Prose Poems* and Ray Gonzalez’ *No Boundaries: Prose Poems by 24 American Poets*.

P.J.: Any anthology on the prose poem is a good thing, and I'm hesitant to be critical since I'm included in both anthologies, and because I know how hard it is to edit one. Lehman's anthology has a truly excellent introduction, and it should be standard reading for any course on the prose poem. As far as the poems go, he chooses a wide variety of styles, and many of the contemporary poems show how indebted the prose poem is to other prose discourses and genres. I was especially glad to see T.S. Eliot's "Hysteria," a very curious poem for Eliot. We can only wonder what would have happened to the prose poem if Eliot had continued to write them.

Lehman got himself into the soup, though, with his title, "Great," and although you can't include everyone, his omissions are glaring. There are certain books written over the last ten years that have drastically altered the direction of the prose poem. The books I'm talking about are unique, written by people missing from Lehman's anthology, poets like Greg Boyd, Morton Marcus, Lawrence Fixel, Gary Young, Steve Berg, Barry Silesky, Linda Smukler, Gian Lombardo, Ray Gonzalez, Jay Meek, Mary Koncel, and I could mention at least ten more. Also, some of his choices stretch the genre too far. Sometimes an apology is really an apology pretending to be a prose poem, instead of a prose poem sharing some traits of an apology. I'd be the last person to try to pigeonhole the prose poem, but not everything is relative.

Gonzalez is immediately off the hook. He insists that one of his primary guiding principles is "quality," but he doesn't suggest he's collecting "great" prose poems, and he admits to being subjective. I tend to agree with most of his criteria, especially his decision to choose poets who have "published prose poetry extensively" and have "helped to erase the boundaries between the linear and prose lyric." I don't think a lot of the younger people in Lehman's anthology (no matter how good some of the individual poems are) have made a real commitment to the genre, and some of the bigger names are, at best, "occasional" prose poets.

But it's easy to be kinder to Gonzalez because his approach is not as comprehensive as Lehman's. If you were to teach a course on prose poetry, probably the best thing would be to order both books, and add *Models of the Universe* for its international flavor. Gonzalez' book, especially, works well because you can direct students to big chunks of work that might suit their sensibilities. I could go on about both anthologies, but I've probably already gotten myself kicked out of their second editions.

The best anthology, of course, would be edited by Michael Benedikt. He should grab his old one and sit down with the editors of recent anthologies—Lehman, Gonzalez, Stuart Friebert and David Young, the New Rivers people, Rupert Loydell, Steve Wilson, and even me. The final product would probably be about two thousand pages long, and still piss off people who weren't in it. In other words, if you don't like an anthology, I suggest that you edit your own and find out what a pain in the neck it is, and how impossible it is to make poets happy.

S.F.: You certainly must have been happy when *Miracles & Mortifications* received the 2001 James Laughlin Award from the Academy of American Poets. I'm wondering how that award has changed your life?

P.J.: I was really honored, and quite frankly, stunned that *Miracles & Mortifications* won the Laughlin Award, and I was pleased when a reviewer said that it was a book James Laughlin would have loved. But the award itself hasn't changed my day-to-day life because I tend not to do many readings or to socialize as much as other poets do. I find that between my teaching and my family (and we just had a new baby) I have very little time to do anything, and my undergraduates would be more impressed if I were a contestant on *The Weakest Link* or eating a pig's eye on *Fear Factor*. Moreover, I will always be indebted to the Academy of American Poets for placing 10,000 copies of *Miracles* into the hands of poetry lovers. That's mind-

boggling. And I'm also grateful to the judges for choosing a book of prose poems from such a small press. I've judged a few contests, so I realize that there is very little that separates the final manuscripts. I'm very aware that the poetry gods have blessed me.

David Cass Interviews Peter Johnson for *WebdelSol*. Reprinted at *Double Room*.

David Cass: In your essay “The Prose Poem and the Comic,” you say that the reason so many comic sensibilities are attracted to the prose poem, as opposed to verse, has to do with the “paradoxical nature of the prose poem, the way it so willingly embraces opposites.” Would you say that it is the form of the prose poem itself that is mainly responsible for inspiring this yoking of opposites and the comic situations which develop, or is it the tradition of the prose poem which makes it a fertile ground for such exploration?

Peter Johnson: It's hard to say why the prose poem seems to predispose itself toward comedy. Perhaps many prose poets are comic poets because they studied the tradition and were influenced by poets like Max Jacob, Zbigniew Herbert, Julio Cortazar, and all those great poets in Michael Benedikt's *The Prose Poem: An International Anthology*. I only have my own experience to go by. Why was I attracted to the prose poem? Why did I decide to write them? I have always been attracted to gray areas of literature. My M.A. thesis was a translation of and introduction to Prudentius' *Psychomachia*, a 4th century Latin text. It was written in a pagan form (Vergilian Latin), but embraced Christian content (a battle between the virtues and vices). The heartbeat of that text sounds when those two forces play off each other. Similarly, I wrote my dissertation on black humor in the novels of John Hawkes. Again, opposites converging. When does humor become black? Who can say? Put five people in front of a large window at 4.a.m. and ask them to raise their hands when it's morning. Everyone will have a different interpretation. So there's a side of me that's comfortable in the midst of opposites. But I also have always been fascinated by surrealism and Dada and shorter genres, so imagine my glee when I came across Benedikt's anthology. But my experience isn't some blueprint for being a prose poet. I have certain interests and obsessions, a certain disposition and certain predispositions, that were probably

always looking for an outlet. Instead of the sonnet, the prose poem presented itself to me. I felt freed from the tyranny of the line which I had studied ad nauseam for what seemed like my entire life, and I could finally speak in a more natural way (at least to me), instead of writing all the bad verse poetry I was writing.

DC: Benedikt's anthology obviously made a great impression on you. You must have felt as if you were looking into a crystal ball—reading your own future. But I'm wondering whether it was Benedikt's anthology that marked a critical change in your writing, steering you toward the prose poem, or whether it was some other factor. Furthermore, what was your experience like when you first experimented with the prose poem?

PJ: When I first “experimented” with the prose poem I didn't know I was writing prose poems. I was fooling around with character sketches. I had been translating the Greek writer Theophrastus, so I started to write a few comic character sketches, three of which are in *Pretty Happy!* When I sent them to journals, some meathead informed me that I was influenced by Russell Edson, whom I had never heard of. So believing that I should at least read the people I'm influenced by I sought out Edson's work, and one thing led to another, until I came upon Benedikt's anthology and began to see that the prose poem had a long history of stealing from other genres like the character sketch, the epistle, the penseé, and so on.

But to speak more generally about influences like that, as I said before, we all have predispositions to certain ways of thinking and expressing ourselves, and if we keep our eyes open and are patient, those forms will present themselves to us. That's probably what happened to me and the prose poem. It wasn't something I thought about. In fact, it wasn't very cool to be a prose poet when I began writing them. They were very hard to publish. You felt as if you should sign up for some Prose Poet Anonymous self-help group, each session beginning with

someone saying, “I am a prose poet,” whereupon the audience, most likely wearing paper bags over their heads, would sympathetically nod.

How did I feel when I first started writing prose poems? I felt freed up, but this sense of freedom was quickly followed by frustration when I realized that freedom in poetry comes at a high price. It was then that I realized I had to create the compression and tension I associate with poetry by trying different ways to make those leaps Bly speaks of in his famous essay “Looking for Dragon Smoke.” By now, I hope I have internalized some kind of form that suits my temperament. Edson once joked that now there is The Peter Johnson Prose Poem, and even if some people think The Peter Johnson Prose Poem stinks, I appreciate that comment.

DC: Speaking of “The Peter Johnson Prose Poem,” I’d like to turn our attention to your book *Miracles and Mortifications*. You talked earlier about your comfort with oppositions, and I see that comfort working thematically throughout your poems. For example, in the second part of your book, “Travels with Oedipus,” the persona comes into contact with historical figures from Western Civilization, both the heroes and the villains, and in each case the comedy undercuts grand narratives associated with these people. Interestingly, the comedy often humanizes the people behind the myths—Socrates has a booger in his nose; Hemingway knocks a trout out with a head-butt; a boy Hitler pretends to be a weathervane and whimsically gazes at the stars. Was that a conscious process, or do you think that comedy, in its essence, reveals the truth of the human condition, that every human being, regardless of their fame or infamy, is ultimately just as uncertain and fallible as the next guy?

PJ: Comedy involves contradiction and juxtaposition, both of which are inherent in life, so the human situation, whether it’s now or in the days of the caveman, was there. I just had to pay attention to it. There are myths or grand narratives handed down to us about huge historical and

literary characters and events, but we also have the right to personalize those grand narratives, which is what I did. In a way, though, those portraits are not fabrications. I'm sure Socrates stunk to high heaven and could have easily been spotted with a booger in his misshapen nose. We also could easily imagine Hemingway, drunk, headbutting a trout. But, of course, I'm making fun of these guys, too. *Miracles* worked for me in two ways. First, I was going through a period where I was battling with my teenage son, so I decided to take us on a tour of history, trying to teach him a few lessons. The models were already there: *Don Quixote*, *Candide*, *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure*, Poindexter and Mr. Peabody from *The Rocky and Bullwinkle Show*. The clash of the high and low in me creates the comedy, and I was constantly juxtaposing high ideas and language with the streetwise language and perspective of my son. I read a lot of biographies when writing these poems and many of the details were taken from them—the serious details that idealize these characters. The comic parts occur when I pretend I'm there. Have you ever been around famous people or “big thinkers”? They often walk around with their zippers down and can be very big jerks.

And this is where the second impulse to write these poems came from. I have this huge respect for the western canon of literature. I really believe in developing a historical sense. I had a classical education at a Jesuit high school, studied Latin and Greek, even in college, and always believed, or I should say, hoped that we could become better people by studying great figures and their ideas. I very much want to make sense of the world and to use these grand narratives as a guide book. But there's a whole other side of me that is skeptical of grand narratives and hero worship. No doubt, if I had lived in ancient Greece, one minute I would have been sitting mesmerized at Socrates feet, while the next making fart noises when he was about to arrive at a startling conclusion. I often think my second impulse is the truer one.

I like to think that many of the figures in *Miracles* would have appreciated the book's humor. I like to believe that the ability to laugh at oneself is a prerequisite for genius. If it isn't, I prefer not to be told so. But I didn't think about this stuff when I was writing the book. Again, my initial desire was to work through a difficult period with my son, to write something we could both laugh at because my son has a great sense of humor. It was a place to start, so that we wouldn't tear off each other's heads. The bonus for me was that I also got a chance to review my entire education. There are hundreds of allusions in these poems. I originally kept notes that I was going to append to the back, as Eliot did in *The Wasteland*, but I felt too self-conscious doing that; it was killing the spontaneity of the poems.

DC: I have often heard you speak critically of the poetry scene, annoyed by a lot of the sniping, so how did you feel when David Foster Wallace wrote that scathing review of *The Best of The Prose Poem*. I read your other interview in *Another Chicago Magazine*, the one reprinted on *Poetry Daily*, and was surprised you didn't mention it.

PJ: I did, but *ACM* left out that section without telling me.

DC: Why do you think someone as huge as Wallace would bother ripping apart a small journal? He even made fun of your name.

PJ: I'm sure there's some crazy-ass story there, but I'd have more luck experiencing the female orgasm than trying to figure out David Foster Wallace. We don't exactly move in the same circles. He's the ultimate insider who keeps pretending to be an outsider. It's also ironic that in his attempt to create a new genre, what he called the "Indexical Book Review," he unwittingly drew attention to the kind of creepy masturbatory intelligence that would undertake such a venture. But I do feel sorry for the many great poems and poets he unjustifiably attacked to feature his wit and intelligence. I felt as if I were watching a serial killer at work. It made me

glad I'm not a genius. It must be very painful.

DC: I'd like to go back to your comments about "pleasantness," which made me think of Tony Hoagland's essay "How to Talk Mean and Influence People." In the essay, Hoagland says, "American Poetry still believes, as romantics have for a few hundred years, that a poem is a straightforward autobiographical testimony to, among other things, the decency of the speaker."

What do you think could be done to change this belief amongst poets and readers alike?

Furthermore, do you think that the prose poem generally suffers less from this belief than verse, and thus offers an outlet to poets trying to keep the poet separate from the poem?

PJ: It's important to note that Hoagland stipulates what he means by meanness. If I understand him right, to be "mean" isn't to demolish people or social conventions just for the fun of it. I don't think he sees the writer as being superior. The speaker can be decent, but if you're too decent, as Hoagland points out, you may not be able "to set free the ruthless observer in all of us, the spiteful angel who sees and tells, unimpeded by nicety or second thoughts."

I agree with him that our current literary culture of pleasantness makes it impossible to deal with many of its complexities and paradoxes. But you can go too far the other way, too. In the course I'm currently teaching on black humor and contemporary poetry, we've come across poets who sometimes fail because they're just mean. Bukowski can be a great offender here; Catullus, too, who I think influenced a lot of contemporary comic poets. I love Catullus' invectives, but often all you're left with is rage. In contrast, a poet like Ginsberg in "America," a very funny poem by the way, saves himself when, after attacking America, he says, "It occurs to me that I am America." Hoagland's narrator in *What Narcissism Means to Me* similarly often accepts responsibility for the mess he describes around him. He makes fun of duplicitous people and cliché-ridden New and Old Age mini-grand narratives, but he also makes us laugh at the

narrative voice in many of those poems. In short, if the satiric or “mean” poet doesn’t bring a certain humility to the table, then he’s in trouble.

How does all this relate to the prose poem? That’s a tough one, since I think the prose poem has been appropriated by the kind of literary culture I’ve been criticizing. Twelve years ago, I couldn’t give my journal away. Now it’s hard to pick up a book of poems and not see a prose poem. In a sense, at least in this country, the prose poem was always thought to be a marginal genre, so it was the perfect form for someone who wanted to write like Catullus or Nicanor Parra. It was fun to be excluded from the Poetry Party. It got the edge up in you, fostered a little anger, which can be a very positive emotion in poetry. Anger can crack open the door to the authentic, and, really, that’s enough for most of us.

D.C: Your new book, *Eduardo and “I”*, a darkly comic book, in some ways is a continuation of the critique that took place in *Miracles*. Yet unlike in *Miracles*, where the target was oftentimes grand narratives of Western Civilization, in *Eduardo* your sight is aimed on contemporary American culture. And you also seem to target yourself more, your own contradictions, using a humor that is much darker and existential.

P.J.: That question assumes that Eduardo, the main character of the first section, is a sort of alter ego, and, in a sense, he is the worst side of me, the anxious, obsessive side. But Eduardo is also much more than that. This book was written at a very odd time for me. On September 2, 2001, I learned that *Miracles* had received the James Laughlin Award, then nine days later the Twin Towers fell, then ten months later we had another child. The book was begun shortly before 9/11 and finished in the summer of 2003, during which time I was emotionally all over the place. The character of Eduardo, who makes up the first section of the book, gave me the opportunity to grapple with certain issues. The first poem of Eduardo’s section has a sentence that reads, “For

once, the eye before the ‘I,’” by which I meant, that the overriding narcissism of American culture momentarily vanished when we were visually confronted by explosions and Americans leaping from fiery skyscrapers. Unfortunately, Eduardo is still self-obsessed, making him distasteful even as he is entertaining, a real buffoon. I guess I’m saying that Eduardo is a cultural artifact as well as a literary persona. As an aside, he also exemplifies another obsession of mine: the double in literature, from Poe’s William Wilson, to Borges’ “I,” to Berryman’s Henry, and so on.

In the second section of the book, an “I” appears who is somewhat autobiographical but still a persona. This section, written after the baby was born, also begins with an allusion to 9/11. The rest of the book chronicles how the narrator tries to make sense of an increasingly absurd world, very often finding consolation in his wife and children. All of this, of course, sounds very planned and “literary,” but in fact the first version of the book was very disorganized and emotionally diffuse. I didn’t have a clue what I was doing. But after I finished it, I set it aside for a time, then returned to it, and began to see a pattern. Fortunately, I think I was able to keep the raw emotion of the first draft in the revision. There are twenty-four poems in each section, and I think the book, in general, follows a structural and emotional logic.

DC: Again you mention the importance of putting the “eye” before the “I,” especially in regards to reacting to such a horrific event as 9/11; in fact, you say that it is the only way for one to react “authentically.” I’m wondering how you, as the writer, make sense of your personas’ reactions to the absurd world that they inhabit. On the one hand, your personas exhibit a remarkable alienation. On the other hand, there seems to be a real sense of community, a shared absurd world that seems to provide for everyone. Take, for example, your prose poem “Neighbors.” At one point the narrator threatens to kill the “local loony” for screaming at his infant. In the next

instant they've become "good friends," and the narrator follows the man everywhere even though he "can't make sense of his mumblings." Do you think that, in a strange way, alienation has the power to unite?

PJ: Well, we are all in the same situation; we just respond to it differently. Eduardo is alienated but because of his inability to see contingencies and his insufferably overdeveloped id, we find it impossible to sympathize with him. In contrast, the guy you refer to in "Neighbors," is harmless, and, for all we know might be closer to the truth than we are. The poet and the loony have always shared the same bed, and it's often hard to discern who's who. They are both outsiders. Whether or not "alienation has the power to unite" is another question, though we'll certainly find out after this last election.

DC: I see what you mean about the poet having to be a bit of an outsider, but these days it seems as if poets aren't just outsiders, they're completely ignored. William Carlos Williams wrote: "It is difficult / to get the news from poetry / yet men die miserably every day / for lack / of what is found there." Perhaps never before in history has that been truer. In this Orwellian day and age when the average person is constantly bombarded with advertisements and 24-hour cable and news that is increasingly from a very limited number of sources, how can the poet maintain his distance and still compete for the attention of potential readers?

PJ: For one thing, there will never be that many readers of poetry, so to lose sleep over that situation is pointless. I agree with you, though, that it is very difficult to promote your work and maintain a distance from the nonsense, but you have to try. For me, it is impossible to write anything worthwhile or to maintain an edge if I'm constantly worrying about this grant or that award or who needs to like me or how many readings I'm going to attend. If you want to be a plumber, you have to accept that you'll eventually end up with arthritis in your back and knees.

As a poet, once you start humiliating yourself for short-term praise, you might as well hang it up.

And yet who doesn't want to be famous? Even I'd like to be on the cover of *Rolling Stone*. Just picture me with my shirt off in a leather vest and black beret, sporting tattooed, creatine-enhanced pectorals and biceps, a headline reading, "The New High Priest of Poetry"—an image which is as silly, not to mention as visually upsetting, as the fantasy behind it. In short, I don't really feel sorry for the plight of the poet. Many of us are professors and paid well for what we do. Many of us have become too soft to be very emotional, and if you don't feel strongly about anything, all that's left is to write about language. But, in spite of all of the above, writing and reading poetry is worth it for those moments when you come across a poem or, if you're lucky, a book that forever changes you. We all hope to read, or, even better, to write such a poem. It can happen.

Jamey Dunham's Interview of Peter Johnson for *Sentence: A Journal of Prose Poetics*

Jamey Dunham: The very title of your recent collection *Rants and Raves: Selected and New Prose Poems* continues a tradition of seemingly contradictory declarations in your work from the subtly paradoxical *Pretty Happy!* to the overt *Miracles & Mortifications*. Readers of your poetry have no doubt come to understand such contradictions often turn out to be false, that the true significance of such dichotomies lies in exploring the oft overlooked common ground. Even the subtitle, *Selected and New Prose Poems*, hints at some culminating moment, while at the same time conceding the poetry itself is moving on; the passenger waking to take in their destination even as the train is pulling out of the station.

Still, the publication of *Rants and Raves* offers an important opportunity to reflect on the considerable accomplishments and contributions you have made within the form. I have even read that Russell Edson has coined the "Peter Johnson Prose Poem" and I would have to agree that such an animal exists, having personally witnessed its progeny in journals across the country. I wonder how you view your work at this stage in your career and if you are able to recognize your own take on the form?

Peter Johnson: It was intimidating to do a "Selected and New." On one hand, I wondered if I had added something significant to the genre; on the other hand I was afraid to discover I hadn't. Finishing a "Selected" and realizing your life's work has basically stunk, or having a critic point it out, is like being married to a woman for forty years, who on your deathbed says that you were not only a jerk but bad in bed.

JD: Are you pleased with the book?

PJ: I am. I especially like the "New" section. Most "New" sections of "Selected" volumes are anemic. I had accumulated about forty poems for a new book, which were "complaints," kind of

mild and not-so-mild invectives. But after rereading them I felt the conceit was becoming a bit tiresome and working against itself, and if the conceit wore me down, I knew readers would feel the same. So I chose the best twenty-four. In a sense, *Rants & Raves* includes a chapbook of sorts.

JD: For me, the most satisfying part of reading any selected works is the opportunity to consider the poems in relation to one another; trace the ancestral lines and mark new branches, areas of growth. As I read through the selections in *Rants and Raves* I was continually surprised at the ways in which poems I had previously read changed dramatically when considered in relation to one another. I felt the book I was reading was something new and that I was seeing each poem and section with fresh eyes. Could you talk a bit about how you went about choosing and arranging the poems for *Rants and Raves*?

PJ: I've come to trust in my intuition and I am a fan of improvisation, so I just kept rereading the poems from previous books, trying to let the "Selected" develop its own rhythm, so that one poem from each book would lead naturally into the next, and so the last poem of each book would foreshadow the first poem of the next one. Happily, I had the perfect bookends. *Rants and Raves* begins with "Pretty Happy!" and ends with a new poem called "Happy." In short, I think *Rants and Raves* has an interesting symmetry to it, which came about from the poems speaking to each other rather than having structure imposed from the outside.

JD: And what of the title? As I mentioned you seem to have an obsession for the grey areas between opposite concepts like miracles and mortifications and opposing characters like Eduardo and "I," and another reviewer has remarked how the "pretty" in "Pretty Happy" tends to undermine or at least qualify the happiness. You also have a fascination for the ampersand in *Miracles & Mortifications* and *Eduardo & "I."* I was surprised to see it missing in *Rants and*

Raves.

PJ: Yes, I've spoken about my fascination for grey areas. It's more than just an aesthetic concern for me. It's an ontological one. In one sense, I've always wished I could be someone who was so far right or left that I'd never doubt myself. That must be comforting. But nothing interesting or authentic happens outside the grey areas. In fact, a lot of bad things occur. There's no room for absolutes in poetry, and poetry that is driven by inflexible theories is doomed. I just finished reading an essay by the recently deceased philosopher Leszek Kolakowski. The essay is called "In Praise of Inconsistency," and Kolakowski points out how the consistent mind, though very efficient, is responsible for a lot of historical horror shows. The trick is to be comfortable with uncertainty. To embrace it, if possible.

JD: And why the title *Rants and Raves* and why did you suddenly discard your signature ampersand?

PJ: The title is very personal, and I've already decreed it be etched on my gravestone. It sums up my daily inner struggles, suggesting the ongoing dialectic between cynicism (rants) and idealism (raves). Rereading my work I realized that most of my poems reflect this dialectic, and much of the humor in my prose poems comes from an everyman torn between cynicism and idealism. I really wanted to keep the ampersand but my friend, Richard Elkington, who designs my books, developed a neat cover that utilized old worn-out Underwood typewriter keys, and it didn't work well visually with the ampersand.

JD: If you don't mind, I'd like to return to my first question about how you view your legacy and if you think there is something called "The Peter Johnson Prose Poem."

PJ: Great questions but hard to answer without sounding like a complete narcissist. I'd like to think that one day I will be attending a special "Peter Johnson" literary conference in Key West,

and a young man in a seersucker suit will describe how my work moved the prose poem in a new direction, and how I single-handedly changed American poetry, whereupon I will be carried outside on participants' shoulders and treated to a night of drunken revelry. But chances are, I'll have to sneak into a similar Key West conference on another poet and upon leaving be struck by a pig's head from a passing pickup. In short, who knows how I'll be received. To be honest, at this point in my life, I don't care. I could stop writing prose poems tomorrow and feel pretty happy about what I've done.

And is there a Peter Johnson prose poem? Yes, I think so. There has to be. Just as there has to be or will be a Jamey Dunham prose poem. If you keep writing and paying attention to what you're doing and are hard on yourself, you can't help but move away from influences and develop your own style. Whether that style has something to offer is another question. But I think we all know when we've done something good. It's a nice feeling when you don't need outside validation.

JD: Let's talk about your readership for a moment. The prose poem has enjoyed a tremendous surge in popularity, thanks in no small part to the success of your poetry and *The Prose Poem: An International Journal*. And yet, as Jacob stated in his preface to *The Dice Cup*, "I hardly know of any poet who's understood what it's all about . . ." If *Rants and Raves* truly does represent a significant moment for the American prose poem, and I think it does, how do you reconcile that awareness with a complimentary yet unengaged readership?

PJ: You can't. I don't think anyone has too big of a readership, and younger poets are more attracted to personalities than to books. This became very clear to me at the AWP in New York. I was supposed to be on a prose-poem panel organized by Julia Johnson, but something happened and I couldn't make it to New York until the next day. I heard the panel was a success and had a

respectable attendance. But the day I arrived I stopped by a prose-poem panel that had Kim Addonizio, Bob Hicok (who I think was a no-show) and some other poets. There had to be 200-300 people in the room. I looked around and didn't notice a soul. Don't get me wrong, I like Addonizio's books and especially Hicok's early work, but I was baffled by why they were on a prose-poem panel, and why there were so many people there. I honestly think people came to see Addonizio, who has somehow become a celebrity. Young poets have grown up in this celebrity-crazed world, and it has seeped into the poetry scene.

So what do you do with all this information? Get mad? Make long speeches about the death of poetry? Personally, I'm more amused than anything by the current poetry scene. It is what is. Who cares? You just try to do the best work you can and maintain some integrity. People will notice at some point if your poems are good. Even the most narcissistic and sycophantic poet wants to read good poems. I mean, bad poems are painful to read.

JD: In addition to your collections of poetry you've published a collection of short stories, *I'm a Man*, and two young adult novels, *What Happened* and *Loserville*. *What Happened* was awarded The Paterson Prize among other recognitions and yet I'm guessing the young adult genre suffers from some of the same issues of readership as prose poetry. Have you found this to be the case?

PJ: The great thing about young adult literature is that it actually has a huge readership, and I've loved going into high schools where 300 kids have read and discussed my book. They ask the most unexpected questions and sometimes point out things I never saw. One teacher who used my first novel in three of his classes for "at-risk boys" sent me their comments, and one kid wrote, "Finally a book that doesn't suck." It doesn't get any better than that.

JD: Does writing fiction deepen or somehow strengthen your understanding of prose poetry?

What do you personally make of the apparent obsession to trace a line where one genre ends and

the other begins?

PJ: It's the opposite for me. I think writing prose poetry is the best apprenticeship for a fiction writer. My first novel, not surprisingly, was described as a long prose poem, or series of prose poems. Most fiction, like most prose poetry, is severely overwritten. Being a prose poet made me tighten up my fiction. My novels are very short and intense. I like that, though the market rewards the big fat novels. Read *Twilight*. I could have cut that novel in half, especially the dialogue. If you ever want to get information out of someone, strap him into a chair and read long passages of dialogue from *Twilight*.

JD: Like YA literature, the audience for the prose poem and the number of people writing them has seen a dramatic rise. Are you at all skeptical about the current flood of prose poems washing up in journals across the country that only few short years ago would never have opened their pages to the form? I can recall an anecdote from your introduction to *The Best of the Prose Poem: An International Journal* where you offered a copy of the anthology to a well known, and generously unnamed, poet only to watch as he "recoiled as if I were handing him a slimy, horned toad, then smugly pointed out that there was no such genre as prose poetry."

PJ: The good news is that so many journals publish prose poems now. Younger poets have no idea how hard it was to have editors read your prose poetry twenty years ago unless you were already an established verse poet. But I do think poets will never really get it that you have to be hard on yourself if you write prose poems.

In terms of that guy I mentioned in my introduction, there will always be prose poem haters, just as there will always be language poetry haters, and surrealistic poetry haters, and so on. It's the rare writer who can accept a type of writing radically different from his own.

JD: While we're on the subject of the literary scene, let's discuss the intricacies of the business

side of things for a moment. When *Miracles & Mortifications* won The Laughlin Award you were immediately thrust to the forefront of the contemporary poetry scene. It must have been gratifying to see your work recognized at such a level but I can also imagine you felt a substantial pressure to follow-up that success with an equally strong and successful book. The resulting collection *Eduardo & "I"* was in many respects more ambitious than its predecessor and yet it was not met with the same fanfare. You have stated in previous interviews your distaste for self-promotion and your reluctance towards the rigors of the reading circuit. What have you learned about literary success as it pertains to the merit of the work as opposed to say the business of being a professional poet?

PJ: I was stunned by the Laughlin Award. I didn't know any of the judges, and I always assumed those awards were inside jobs. It was gratifying to know that an unknown guy could still have a chance, and the people at the Academy of American Poets were very gracious to me and my wife when I went to New York to read. I'm sure the Academy took some heat when a book of prose poems by a relatively obscure poet won.

But I'd been around long enough to realize that all the finalists could have won. A lot is luck. I understand that my book went unnoticed, and then one person became a strong advocate for it. Afterwards I can't tell you how many people said I was now poised to move to a "new level." They all kept using that phrase, and I didn't know what the hell they were talking about. I knew the award wasn't going to change my life because we'd just had a child, so between him and my teaching the only level I was rising to was the second floor of my house to change his diapers. Ironically, I think *Eduardo & "I"* did go to another level and that it was much better than *Miracles*. It had hundreds of allusions and was exhausting and emotional to write. After I finished it I felt like going on a Valium drip for a month. But you can't expect to win the

Laughlin Award every time you write a book.

JD: So what was the “new level” everyone was talking about?

PJ: Again, it was the celebrity level. I guess I was supposed to start a blog and travel coast-to-coast, reading my poems to five people at various Borders bookstores. Or now that my name was out there I should have started a few fights at conferences or cheated on my wife with a number of distressed younger women—anything to keep people talking about me. I don’t mean to be a jerk but I honestly don’t know how people do all this socializing unless they don’t have kids, significant others, or even pets.

JD: You have previously mentioned the frustration you feel when you read earlier poems that could benefit from revision. Let’s look at the first section of the book, the poems taken from your first collection *Pretty Happy!* How did those poems hold up for you?

PJ: I’m very fond of that book but I can see many influences in it. Sometimes I think the book is like a history of the prose poem from Theophrastus’ character sketches (which I had translated) to Simic’s vignettes, though I still see my own preoccupations with father-son relationships, the nonsense of the poetry world (“The Genius,” “Poet Laureate,” and “19th-Hole Condom Poem”), and also my interest in questions of theodicy. The crucial poem in that volume was the last one, “The Millennium.” It changed everything for me and was the only poem I wrote in long hand. I was in Buffalo visiting family, and on Christmas Eve I went sledding with my oldest son who was then about ten. We went flying over a snowboarding hump and when I landed I heard a crack and knew I had broken my back. I spent two days in the hospital, and then a few at my mother’s, heavily medicated. I took in all the images around me—the Christmas tree, the various Barbie Dolls and other presents, and began to jot them down, trusting in my imagination to juxtapose and make sense of them. That was the first time I relied mostly on intuition. It was an

exhilarating experience and provided me with a method of composition, or at least a place to start.

JD: *Pretty Happy!* opens with two of my favorite prose poems from your early work: the title poem “Pretty Happy!” and “Nettles.” The two poems arranged together offer a perfect lens through which to view the work that follows. We see the self-deprecating, wise-guy alongside the romantic artist who can’t help but cast himself and his surroundings in a classical light. Do you feel your current poems are still born to some degree from this duality?

PJ: Yes, always the constant friction between the idealist and the cynic. I’m constantly disappointed in myself and others yet also believe things can get better. Anyone can be a wise guy, but whiners are boring, and so are their poems because they have no resonance.

JD: The second section of *Rants and Raves* consists of poems from *Miracles & Mortifications*. The symmetry of the two sections, “Travels with Gigi” and “Travels with Oedipus,” is as apparent in these selections as in the original collection; however, this time I was more aware of how the odysseys speak not just to your relationships with your wife and son but also to your relationship with poetry. You’ve mentioned in previous interviews the contradictory nature of the poems in this collection, the grand historical allusions offset by self-deprecating humor and vulnerability. The poems in this section are tighter, more ambitious and ultimately more confident than the poems they proceed and yet they go to great lengths to humanize the speaker, often tripping him to prevent him from reaching any pedestals. Were you aware of this at the time these poems were written and looking back on them now, is that a fair assessment of how you viewed yourself as a poet?

PJ: It’s hard to say. Some of the decisions were conscious. I love unreliable narrators, so I wanted them in both sections. But I wanted the reader to like the narrators, to understand that

they were doing the best they could. One narrator has a nymph for a girlfriend, and the other, an incorrigible teenager. As I've said, I had my literary precedents. For the love poems there were many, especially *Lolita*, Ovid, Catullus, and Andreas Capellanus. For the son poems, *Don Quixote*, *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventures*, and *The Rocky and Bullwinkle Show*. Most of the poems in *Miracles* are mock heroic. I love that genre. But the personal was also there. The love poems were inspired by my wife's eroticism, or at least how I perceive that eroticism, though, unlike Gigi, my wife is the least neurotic person I know. The son poems were inspired by my son's difficult teenage years. But you're right to say that both those sections are really about language, and Nabokov and Max Jacob showed me the way. I invented words, joined the strangest phrases and images, and had fun playing with double entendre. In this sense, the book is a tribute to how elusive yet suggestive language can be, and how a writer can manipulate an audience with it.

JD: There is a palpable shift in tone and style between the selections from *Miracles & Mortifications* and *Eduardo & "I"*. While structurally there are some similarities in these poems to the previous sections, there is also an underlying darkness, a starker contrast between the heavy and the light. What was the motivation or driving force behind the poems in this collection? Was it personal or artistic? Can the two ever be entirely separated?

PJ: I think *Eduardo & "I"* is my best book. There is still humor, but you're right to say it's very dark. The "Eduardo" section was my response to 9/11. To me the character of Eduardo is a cultural artifact, the embodiment of narcissism in our country. While the whole world is falling apart, he's more interested in getting tattoos. He's really my dark side, and the "I" of that section is very much me. I've always had a fascination for the double in literature, so I ran with that. It's a very disturbing section, and yet you have to laugh at Eduardo as you would at all those whack-

jobs sharing embarrassing details of their lives on reality TV shows. When I wrote that book I was kind of giving up on people and institutions, but, at the same time, as I said, a year after 9/11 we had another child, a little boy. That's where the second section comes in, and the "I" is more autobiographical. That "I" is still struggling, especially with questions of theodicy, but you can see how family saves him, how playing with his little kid, or imagining his teenage son telling the "whole damn neighborhood just how much he loves [him]," makes it possible for him to get up in the morning. And let's not forget the importance sex, "those endless nights in damp and twisted sheets." If I had written only *Eduardo & "I"* and then got hit by a bus, I could have died happy. As much as I like the "New" section of *Rants & Raves* and enjoy reading it to an audience, I'll never write something as good as *Eduardo*. I know that sounds self-congratulatory, but what the hell. It's been four years since *Eduardo* was published, and when I read it I feel that someone else wrote it. That's always a good sign.

JD: So who is the Peter Johnson who wrote the poems found in the "New" section and do you feel these poems would be possible without the poems that preceded them?

PJ: The Peter Johnson of the "New poems" was angry at the Bush administration, angry at the general idiocy of Americans, and angry at the world of Po-Biz. I consider most of the new poems to be invectives. Some were painful to write, others quite a bit of fun. The invective is an underappreciated genre, and you don't see it too much anymore. It's important to note that the epigraph for *Rants and Raves* is the title of the Ramones' last album, *Adios Amigos*. That's the way I felt. I thought it was time to say goodbye and go unquietly away. But then I couldn't help but close the book with "Y'all come back now," knowing I might change my mind. No matter how much you feel as if you're pissing into the wind when you kill yourself writing poems not many people will read, something brings you back. Maybe you go to a reading and hear a terrific

poem. Maybe a student tells you, almost in tears, about when he first fell in love with poetry. In my Introduction to Literature course, for the last week of classes I have my freshmen read Dana Gioia's essay, "Can Poetry Matter?" Then I ask them to choose their favorite short poem and recite it to the class and write a one-page paper, explaining why the poem matters. Their responses are often very moving. I guess what I'm saying is that when you can ignore all the nonsense associated with contemporary American poetry, you eventually see that poetry does matter, that it can really change people's lives.

JD: As you look ahead now, do you like where you see yourself and your poetry going?

PJ: I'm not sure where I'm going. As we discussed earlier, I've been writing literary young adult novels, which are considered "crossover novels," that is novels for adults too. I would like to find some way to merge the prose poem and the young adult novel. I'd like to write a novel in prose poems, but make it as literary as any of my other books. I've also begun to edit my correspondence with Edson from 1992 to 2007. I think I have about 350 letters from him. We'll see. Right now, I need a short break. In 2011, I will have published seven books in eleven years with a heavy teaching load and a little boy who was born when I was fifty. I need to slow things down, and there are a lot of books I've been wanting to read, and new class preparations I'd like to work on. I've always received more pleasure from giving a good class than getting a poem published. I'd also like to get back to taking naps. Edson tells me he's a great napper.